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RUEHBS/AMEMBASSY BRUSSELS 3014
RUEHG/USMISSION GENEVA 4081
RUEHLO/AMEMBASSY LONDON 2948
RUEHRO/AMEMBASSY ROME 6304
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TAGS: [EAID](#) [PHUM](#) [SENV](#) [EAGR](#) [PGOV](#) [ET](#)
SUBJECT: USG HUMANITARIAN ASSISTANCE TEAM IN ETHIOPIA: SOMALI REGION
SECURITY UPDATE

SUMMARY

[¶1.](#) Between December 20 and 22, the U.S. Government (USG) Humanitarian Assistance Team (HAT) in Ethiopia security officer met with representatives from the U.N., U.S. Embassy, and non governmental organizations (NGOs) in Addis Ababa to discuss security conditions in Somali Region. Discussions confirmed that access and the security environment remain fluid in the five zones of military operations. NGOs and U.N. agencies report conflicting accounts on the frequency and scale of clashes between the Ethiopian National Defense Forces (ENDF) and the Ogaden National Liberation Front (ONLF). Since mid-December, the ENDF has detained U.N. staff on three occasions at newly established checkpoints in the region. However, recent reports also note improved access for NGOs in parts of Somali Region in recent weeks. End summary.

CONFLICTING REPORTS ON CLASHES

[¶2.](#) Recent reports from NGOs and the U.N. Department of Safety and Security (UNDSS) offer conflicting characterizations of active fighting between the ENDF and ONLF in the restricted Warder, Korahe, Gode, Fik, and Degehabur zones under military operations. UNDSS

cautions that NGO reports of large-scale clashes are often exaggerated; however, smaller clashes continue to occur. On December 14, a small-scale skirmish killed two civilians in Kebridahar District, Korahe Zone, according to UNDSS. In other areas of Somali Region, UNDSS and local NGOs note the absence of fighting and improved commercial access, in particular in the Somalia border districts on Kelafo, Mustahil, and Ferfer in Gode Zone.

U.N. STAFF DETAINED AT CHECKPOINTS

¶13. In a new development, the ENDF has detained U.N. staff at recently created checkpoints between Jijiga and Degehabur zones. Since mid-December, the ENDF has established three new checkpoints in the area. UNDSS speculates that the increase in checkpoints is an effort to control media access to the region following the December 14 release of the New York Times article by reporter John Gettleman criticizing the Government of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia's (GFDRE) role in the current crisis. Between December 18 and 20, the ENDF detained three U.N. vehicles and staff, including the U.N. World Food Program (WFP) Jijiga head of office on December 20, approximately 20 kilometers south of Jijiga town. The ENDF confiscated the WFP staff's cellular phones before releasing the staff unharmed four hours later.

IMPROVED NGO ACCESS

¶14. In parts of Somali Region, NGOs report improved access and mobility in recent weeks. Action Contre la Faim (ACF) in Korahe Zone notes improved access in Kebridahar town and surrounding areas in Kebridahar District since late September, under the provision that ACF submit a plan of movement prior to travel in the area. According to UNDSS, an operational ban on ACF and Medecins du Monde in Korahe Zone was officially lifted on December 13.

CONCLUSION AND COMMENTS

¶15. Discussions with U.N., U.S. Embassy, and NGO representatives indicate a variable and fluid access and security environment in Somali Region. Reports of improved NGO access in some areas coincide with an increase in military checkpoints in other locations. The requirement for NGOs to provide a plan of movement in Korahe Zone and the recent U.N. staff detentions between Jijiga and Degehabur zones underscore the importance of communicating and obtaining GFDRE approval for all travel in the region. In addition, the U.S. Embassy Regional Security Officer strongly advised that USG HAT travel in the region be comprised of small teams for short trips, in place of a protracted presence in one location. On December 27, the USG HAT security officer will accompany the program officer and health and nutrition specialist to Jijiga and Degehabur zones on a preliminary three-day assessment to further evaluate field conditions and inform security planning for future travel in Somali Region. End comment.

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